

LAMINATE FOR GUM PACKAGING

Field of the Invention

The invention relates to the packaging of chewing gum. Specifically,
5 the invention is directed to an improved laminate for the outer wrapper of gum packaging.

Background of the Invention

Chewing gum packaging formed from laminates is known. The laminates used for gum packaging are designed to minimize the transmission of oxygen and moisture. Conventionally, sticks of chewing gum are packaged in two
10 separate wrappers, an inner wrapper disposed around each individual stick of gum, and an outer wrapper housing a plurality of sticks. The outer wrapper is known in the industry as a counterband.

Some issues facing packagers of chewing gum are discussed in U.S.
15 Patent No. 5,376,388 to Meyers, which is incorporated herein by reference.

Chewing gum loses or gains moisture from the environment depending on the ambient temperature, humidity, and packaging type. The gain or loss of moisture also depends on the shape and composition of the chewing gum. Chewing gums with sugar generally have corn syrup and a small amount of humectant such
20 as aqueous sorbitol or glycerin. These gums tend to dry out and become brittle when stored in ambient humidity less than 50%. Higher ambient temperatures exasperate the gum's tendency to dry out.

Sugarless gums typically contain lower amounts of moisture than sugar-containing gums. It is particularly important to maintain a low moisture
25 content in sugarless gums which are sweetened with aspartame or other moisture-sensitive artificial sweeteners, thus preventing the loss of flavor. These sugarless gums have a lower initial moisture content and higher level of hygroscopic

ingredients than do sugar-containing gums. Thus, sugarless gums tend to gain moisture when exposed to relative humidity above 40%, causing degradation of the moisture-sensitive ingredients.

It is known to package chewing gum in a laminate formed from a tissue or paper substrate that defines an inner surface for contacting the chewing gum and a metal foil outer surface. The metal foil provides resistance to the transmission of both moisture and vapor. This laminate will be referred to as the inner wrapper.

Typically, the inner wrapper does not provide sufficient barrier properties for long term storage of chewing gum. Thus, it is common to house a group of individually wrapped gum sticks in an outer wrapper or counterband. The conventional counterband is a laminate having greater long term resistance to the passage of gas and moisture. A conventional counterband may comprise numerous layers; one known structure being: (1) aluminum foil; (2) polyethylene; (3) paper; (4) adhesive; (5) reverse printed ink; (6) oriented polypropylene; and (7) release over-laquer. The counterband seals and contains the sticks of gum wrapped in their inner wrappers until a consumer tears open the counterband to remove the first stick.

Although the inner wrapper and counterband provide sufficient barrier properties for the long term storage of chewing gum, the system raises a number of issues. The cost of the laminates is one issue. Utilization of multi-layer laminates in place of simple paper webs substantially increases packaging costs. For at least some chewing gums, packaging costs can comprise a substantial portion of the product's overall cost. However, without the use of laminates, the shelf-life of chewing gum would be substantially reduced.

Another issue facing the packagers of gum is the well known problem of slip agent migration. Slip agents, commonly found in laminates, enhance the processing thereof by reducing the coefficient of friction of the laminate as measured against itself and against machine parts across which the laminate may slide during processing. The decreased coefficient of friction allows the laminate to be easily moved across such surfaces without ripping or wrinkling. However, slip agents are prone to migration which can cause delamination of the laminate as well as interference with adhesion of metallized coatings.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention is directed to a new laminate which is especially well suited for gum packaging. The invention is more specifically directed to a laminate ideal for forming a counterband for packaging a stack of chewing gum sticks. The preferred embodiment of the new laminate comprises a foil layer, a polymer web, a paper web, surface printed ink, and an electron beam cured layer. The electron beam cured layer contains slip agents which are "reacted-in", solving the common problem of slip agent migration. A wax layer is also preferably provided, the wax being used to seal the package.

The laminate of the present invention is more economical to produce than a conventional laminate for gum packaging. Production of a laminate according to the present invention requires fewer raw materials than does a conventional gum packaging laminate. Further, the laminate of the present invention may be produced in fewer manufacturing steps.

Brief Description of the Drawing

For the purpose of illustrating the invention, there is shown in the drawings a form which is presently preferred; it being understood, that this invention is not limited to the precise arrangements and instrumentalities shown.

Figure 1 is a schematic cross sectional view of a laminate according to the present invention.

Figure 2 is a perspective view of a gum package according to the present invention.

Figure 3 is a schematic cross sectional view of an alternative embodiment of the laminate according to the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Drawing

With reference to the drawings, there is shown a laminate generally identified by the numeral 10. The laminate 10 is preferably preprinted and is ideally suited for use in gum packaging.

A preferred embodiment of the invention, represented by laminate 10, is formed using a number of layers, as shown in Figure 1. The layers include (from inside to outside as the gum wrapper is formed): an aluminum foil layer 12; a polymer layer 14; a paper layer 16; an ink layer 18; and an electron beam cured

layer 20. A wax layer 22 is further disposed on top of the electron beam cured layer to seal the counterband. The layers represented in Figure 1 are represented schematically and are not drawn to scale.

Foil layer 12, polymer layer 14, and paper layer 16 serve substantially the same purposes as their analogous layers in a conventional gum wrapper. The foil layer 12 serves as a barrier to gas transmission. In this embodiment the foil layer 12 comprises aluminum; it being understood that other metal foils are also suitable.

Polymer layer 14 provides adhesion and tear resistance to the laminate. Polymer layer 14 is preferably a layer of polyethylene. The polymer layer 14 can alternatively be formed from other polymers having suitable adhesion and strength properties. A suitable polymer for forming the polymer layer 14 has adequate resistance to punctures and tears to avoid damage from the stresses normally encountered in shipping and storage of chewing gum.

The paper layer 16 adds bulk, serves as a printable substrate, provides texture to the laminate, and provides dead-fold properties. The laminate 10 is preferably provided with printing. Thus, an ink layer 18 is shown in Figure 1. Ink layer 18 is surface printed onto paper layer 16 using any acceptable printing technique. Of the four traditional printing techniques of offset lithography, flexography, screen-printing and gravure, which are practiced worldwide, gravure printing is currently preferred. The printing unit applies an ink layer 18 to paper layer 16. The printing may contain indicia to identify the source of the gum contained within the counterband. The printing may also include nutritional information or other facts relevant to a potential purchaser, such as an expiration date or recommended sale price. Ideally, the printed image is eye catching and attractive to the consumer, thereby enticing a sale of the gum in which the package formed from laminate 10 is contained. After ink application, the film is preferably run through a drying unit to dry the ink layer 50.

An electron beam curable coating 20 is applied to laminate 10, thus protecting the ink layer 18. The electron beam curable coating 20 is coated on to the paper layer 16, thereby sandwiching ink layer 18 between the electron beam

curable coating 20 and paper layer 16. Most any conventional coating unit, well known to those skilled in the art, may be employed for this purpose.

The electron beam curable coating may comprise a number of species of suitable compounds. One group of compounds which has been found to be suitable is sold by Rohm & Haas under the registered trademark MOR-QUIK, owned by Morton International, Inc., a subsidiary of Rohm & Haas. The materials best suited for the electron beam curable coating 20 are a combination of oligomers and monomers. The preferred oligomer is an epoxy acrylate. The preferred monomer is an acrylate. The monomers act as diluents, used to reduce the viscosity of the coating for application purposes. The concentration of monomer is adjustable to provide a wide range of viscosity, such that many conventional coating systems may be employed to apply the electron beam curable coating. The blend ratio of oligomer and monomer also controls physical properties and adhesion of the coating.

Various desirable additives, the exact nature of which will depend on the specifications of the laminate desired, may also be added. Often, defoamers and slip agents are desirable. It is well known to provide such additives to polymer films to improve various qualities such as coefficient of friction, gloss, and processing qualities. The additives provided with the laminate of the present invention become "reacted-in" during crosslinking of the electron beam curable coating. For example, the slip agents, provided to improve the coefficient of friction, are fixed in the crosslinking process, and are therefore not susceptible to the common problems associated with slip agent migration in laminates. The stability of the electron beam curable coating and its additives therefore allows for greater control of the gloss and slip qualities of the laminate, allowing a manufacturer to create laminates according to demanding specifications. In one embodiment, the coefficient of friction of the laminate as measured against itself is preferably 0.2, in order to allow fast processing speeds.

The electron beam curable coating is cured using a suitable electron beam source. Suitable electron beam sources may be obtained commercially from Energy Science, Inc. of Wilmington, Massachusetts.

The amount of energy absorbed, also known as the dose, is measured in units of MegaRads (MR or Mrad) or kiloGrays (kGy), where one Mrad is 10 kGy, one kGy being equal to 1,000 Joules per kilogram. The electron energy output should be within the range of 100 keV to 170 keV at a dosage of 2.0 to 5.0 MegaRads. Preferably, the energy is within the range of 125 keV to 135 keV at a dosage of 3.0 to 4.0 MegaRads.

When exposed to an electron beam from a suitable source, acrylate monomer reacts with the epoxy acrylate chains to form crosslinks. The precursor molecules are excited directly by the ionizing electron beam. Therefore no initiator compounds are required, so no residual volatile organic compounds are present in the finished product. Moreover, curing is substantially instantaneous and provides a cure percentage at or near one hundred percent.

It has been found that the electron beam curable coating of the present invention can be processed at manufacturing speeds in excess of 1200 feet per minute. Such processing speeds are a great improvement over typical lamination speeds which are about 600 feet per minute.

Once the electron beam curable coating 20 has been cured, a wax layer 22 is deposited thereon. The wax layer 22 is desirable for sealing the counterband. The wax layer 22 may be formed from any wax with suitable sealing properties and safe for packaging of food; such waxes are well known to those skilled in the art. Acceptable waxes for use in layer 22 include paraffin wax (preferred), carnauba wax, beeswax, polyethylene wax, microcrystalline wax and candellia wax.

The laminate of this embodiment may be manufactured by a process involving a series of rollers, means to laminate the foil, polymer and paper layers, one or more printing stations, means to coat the electron beam curable coating on to the film, and an electron beam source.

In an alternative embodiment, represented in Figure 3, the inner layers of a laminate 110 comprise a polymer web 114, an inorganic layer 124 and a paper layer 116. An adhesive or polymer layer 126 bonds the paper layer 116 to the polymer web 114. The outer layers, surface printed ink 118, electron beam cured coating 120 and wax 122 of this embodiment are substantially the same as the analogous layers of the embodiment shown in Figure 1.

The polymer layer 114 is preferably a polyethylene terephthalate (PET) web with a thin vacuum deposited metallized layer thereon, the preferred metal being aluminum. Oriented polypropylene has also been found to be effective as the polymer layer 114. The metallized layer in this embodiment is the inorganic layer 124. As with Figure 1, Figure 3 is schematic and is not drawn to scale.

The metallized layer is formed through a vacuum deposition process. In the metallization process, a thin layer of metal is vapor deposited onto the polymer layer 114. While the metallized layer is very thin, it can serve as an effective barrier to transmission of all gases when applied to an appropriate substrate. Metallization also provides an aesthetically pleasing appearance.

Aluminum oxide and silicon oxide (Al_2O_x or SiO_x) are also useful coatings, particularly as a barrier to oxygen and moisture. Thus, in another embodiment, the inorganic layer 124 is formed from these oxides. The coatings can be applied to the polymer layer 114 by any means known in the art, including the use of a high energy electron beam evaporation process, chemical plasma deposition, and sputtering. Another method of forming an aluminum oxide or silicon oxide coating involves the treating of the sheet with an aqueous solution having an appropriate pH level to cause the formation of aluminum oxide or silicon oxide on the sheet.

The inorganic layer 124 may be only a few hundredths of a mil thick, a mil being 1 / 1000 of an inch. (It is noteworthy that the thickness of inorganic layer 40 is greatly exaggerated in Figure 1 for purposes of clarity in defining the structure of the laminate.) The polymer layer 114 and inorganic layer 124 may be referred to jointly as a single metallized polymer layer.

The laminate of this embodiment may be manufactured by a process involving a series of rollers, a vapor deposition apparatus or coating unit, means to laminate the polymer and paper layers, one or more printing stations, means to coat the electron beam curable coating on to the film, and an electron beam source. Various methods of coating an electron beam curable coating on to an oxygen barrier coating and to various polymer webs are described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,725,909 to Shaw et al, hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

The process of manufacturing the laminate of the present invention is less costly than that of a conventional laminate. Further, production is less expensive because fewer raw materials are required. In the present invention, the electron beam cured layer performs the function of multiple layers (an adhesive, an OPP layer and a release over-laquer) found in conventional laminates.

As noted above, the laminate of the current invention is ideal for use in the production of counterbands. Figure 2 shows a counterband 50 formed from the laminate described herein. Using various techniques well known to the skilled artisan, the laminate may be folded and sealed to itself in order to form the counterband 50. The counterband 50 is preferably formed substantially in the shape of a flexible rectangular parallelepiped or cuboid 52. The flexible cuboid 52 should be of the type which can be easily opened to access the gum therein. It is preferable that means for opening the cuboid 52 be provided. Such opening means are contemplated to include tear strips and lines of weakness. The cuboid 52 as shown in Figure 2 has been opened by a consumer using such an opening means.

The present invention may be embodied in other specific forms without departing from the spirit or essential attributes thereof and, accordingly, reference should be made to the appended claims, rather than to the foregoing specification, as indicating the scope of the invention.